

A4NH-CGIAR Partner Consultations:

Toward a Common Food Systems Narrative and Approaches

Low- and middle-income countries are in the midst of a rapid dietary transition. While some consumers still lack access to enough food, for others, the growing availability and consumption of processed foods and increasingly sedentary lifestyles are leading to accelerating rates of overweight and obesity. Present food systems are clearly not equipped to provide all consumers with the ability to choose nutritious and healthy diets in a sustainable, affordable, and equitable way. Governments, businesses, and civil society groups increasingly realize the importance of supporting food systems that produce and supply diverse, nutritious, and safe foods for healthy lives and doing so within planetary boundaries, providing support for decent livelihoods for all.

Background

CGIAR has placed great emphasis on food systems research, with eight agri-food system programs and an emphasis on food systems in its 2019-21 business plan. In fact, the 2017 CGIAR Performance Report was titled “Transforming the Global Food System.” However, operationalizing these aspirations into a food systems research agenda and portfolio is challenging. As in any systems research, partnerships and coordination are critical to leverage the diverse contributions required to address “enough” elements of the system to contribute to food system change. The system change outcomes are relatively well understood – jobs and income; sustainability and health. However, the necessary elements and their trade-offs, and how they come together to sufficiently contribute to the desired development outcomes, are complex.

Given the importance of a food systems approach to nutrition and health outcomes, A4NH developed

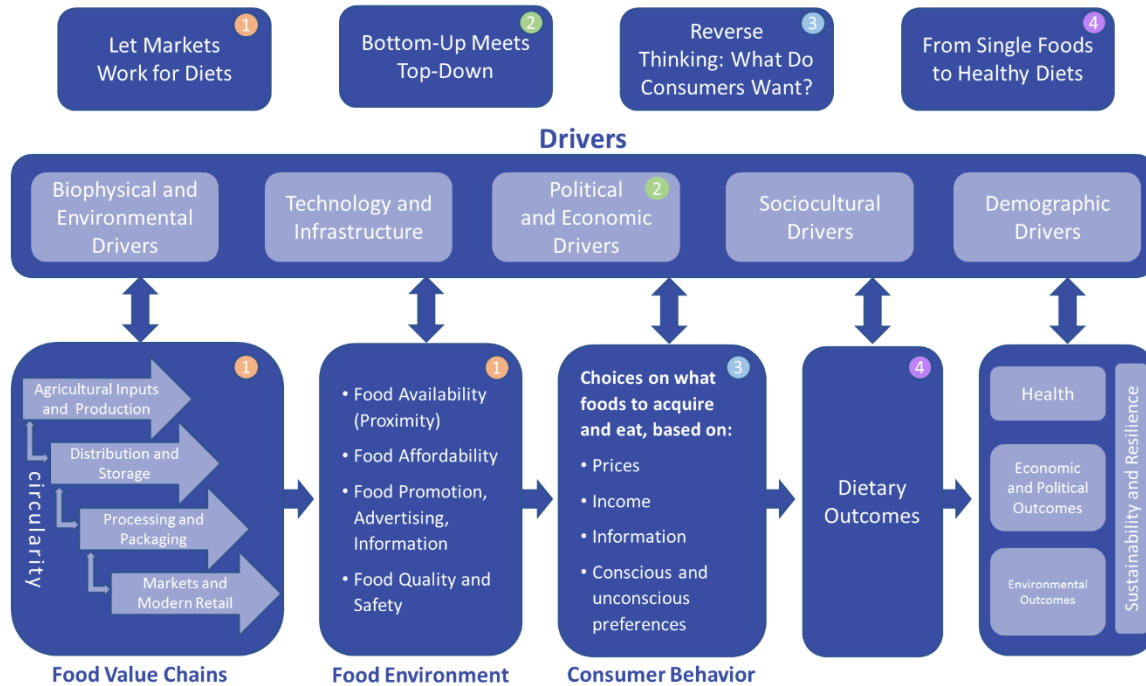
a new research program area called Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) in its 2017-22 proposal. Led by Wageningen University & Research (WUR), the FSHD flagship links A4NH’s work on food systems to that of other CRPs and Centers and helps link CGIAR researchers to the nutrition and public health communities with whom A4NH works. A4NH envisioned contributing to CGIAR and partner thinking on food systems research as part of its Research Strategy to 2030, and through building a body of practice and evidence in partnership with interested CGIAR Centers, CRPs, and partners.

To meet this integrating objective, A4NH hosted meetings with CGIAR partners in Ethiopia and Bangladesh in February and March 2019, respectively. The meetings brought together around 80 participants representing A4NH, particularly its FSHD flagship team, CGIAR Centers, agri-food systems and integrating CRPs, and other partners. Attendees identified present activities related to food systems, discussed priority areas for collaboration, developed common food system narratives for these areas, and agreed on follow-up activities globally and for specific countries.

Towards Common Food Systems Narratives

The Committee on World Food Security High-Level Panel of Experts’ conceptual framework of food systems for diets and nutrition was used to map food system activities across CGIAR. As expected, most activities were clustered around food supply systems, agricultural production, and value chains of specific crops, focusing on specific outcomes such as environmental and economic sustainability, but less on diets and nutrition. Less work was found around consumer behavior and the food environment, and activities around these

Conceptual framework of food systems for diets and nutrition



Adapted from de Brauw et al. 2019, based on HLPE framework

were isolated in particular CRPs or Centers with limited linkages between them. Challenges identified related to:

- Markets in the broad sense of the word linking food supply systems with consumers. Effective involvement of a wider range of private partners in these markets is crucial, together with increased attention to reduction and re-use of food waste and losses (circularity).
- Recognizing the importance of reaching the consumer needs a shift from an emphasis on production and income improvement to including considerations on impact on consumers and diets.
- Accepting the central role of diets necessitates the integration of single commodity programs into a more holistic food systems approach. The food systems approach requires a recognition and explicit assessment of trade-offs of the different interventions to food system outcomes

such as health, environmental sustainability, equity, jobs and employment.

- A food systems approach must consider governance and coordination at different national and sub-national levels, supporting and strengthening national food system ownership, relevance, and resilience.

Four priority thematic areas were identified that offer potential for collaboration and alignment between CRPs and Centers in food systems research. Below, narratives developed on why, how, and for what a CGIAR-wide collaboration is needed for each area are proposed.

Food Systems Narrative 1: Let Markets Work for Diets

Food environments play a central role in connecting food supply systems with consumers, determining the availability and accessibility of healthy diets. Although there is considerable anecdotal information, there are few studies and a

paucity of evidence on how agri-food systems link to and interact with food environments in order to provide healthy diets for consumers in CGIAR focus countries. Women, especially in countries where their movement is restricted, often have limited access to information and places where nutritious foods are provided, reducing their decision power to buy nutritious foods. There is unused potential to reduce and re-use food waste and losses.

Through joint efforts in key countries, CGIAR can identify interventions and policy instruments to support a diverse food environment and influence food environment dynamics and circularity to support healthy diets. This requires understanding, for example, whether providing information to market agents and entrepreneurs as well as consumers will lead to better access to healthy diets. It will involve identifying new and innovative ways to enhance women's access to nutritious foods, for example through mobile food stores visiting women's group meetings, homes, and other places women frequent. It also asks for more effort to find ways to reduce food waste and loss, to stimulate circularity and reduce feed-food competition. These actions will leverage CGIAR's strong value chain work to better support sustainable food environments leading to healthy diets.

Food Systems Narrative 2: Bottom-Up Meets Top-Down

There is often a disconnect between local demands and the research CGIAR offers. For example, in addressing food systems, different issues are at stake at national and subnational levels. In addition, researcher action is often guided by publications, which are sometimes out of date by the time they are published. Bridging these gaps will enable work to have a greater impact. National-level work benefits, for example, from connections to grounded pilots at a local level. This asks for governance and coordination at multiple levels.

CGIAR has an opportunity to support governance of research and ensure active involvement of bottom-up convenors such as consumer associations or market boards. CGIAR can also leverage the strengths of the private sector, including small and medium enterprises who are the providers of food to consumers, particularly in urban areas. This will lead to an improved contextualisation of solutions and strengthen the impact of investments to support improved resilience of the population at multiple levels.

Food Systems Narrative 3: Reverse Thinking: What Do Consumers Want?

Whether or not produce improved through agri-food systems interventions will end up in a consumer's food basket, and support a healthier diet, depends largely on choices consumers make. These choices are influenced by factors including cultural preferences, aspirations, convenience, and price. However, very little is known about consumers and the drivers of their choices. This limits the capacity to incorporate consumer considerations into agri-food systems work. CGIAR, in collaboration with other partners, could share and develop methodologies to characterize consumers and assess their choices, to increase the understanding of why people eat what they eat, and what the main barriers are in choosing a healthier diet. Using this information in agri-food system interventions to address consumer choices can help shape investments to improve translation into healthy diets. For example, evidence-based information on drivers of consumer choice helps develop and test innovative ways to provide the right information to consumers to enable them to choose healthy and sustainable diets. Moreover, understanding consumer motives supports developing and testing alternate ways to deliver food. Strengthening links between agri-food interventions and consumer motives will enable better leveraging of investments that support healthier diets.

Food Systems Narrative 4: From Single Foods to Healthy Diets

Much of CGIAR's CRP structure is organized along different commodities, such as rice, livestock, or wheat. Institutional structures and mandates often prevent integrating this single-crop work to identify holistic solutions to complex food systems problems, or to address tradeoffs of single-crop solutions to food systems outcomes such as healthier and sustainable diets. This structure can result in siloed perspectives of problems that make it unclear how to work together toward resolution. To address this mindset, CGIAR needs to identify incentives to enable collaborative research. One way to do so is to establish a shared commitment to a common goal, perhaps in the context of a particular country. For example, to focus on policies in Ethiopia with a major impact on food systems performance, especially diets and nutrition, CGIAR Centers, CRPs, and national partners can be organized around addressing top priorities identified by the country. With a common theory of change, those involved can determine the roles of the different stakeholders, creating a path for joint fundraising around priority problems. This commitment should link in existing national platforms with some degree of national traction. Moving toward this model will strengthen country coordination of CGIAR investments and align research in support of national partners, working toward a common goal.

Next Steps

During the consultation workshops, a number of specific next steps were proposed by working groups of participants ([see report](#)). These can be summarized under three major action areas:

1. Food System Community/ies of Practice

- Further develop and adapt common food system framework and narratives;
- Contribute to CGIAR foresight discussions on food system transformation;
- Provide opportunities for developing joint proposals on food system innovations;
- Link to strategic food system partners for the CGIAR, including the Agriculture, Nutrition and Health Academy; and
- Start with a Community of Practice among nutritionists across CGIAR programs and Centers, initially focussing on addressing food environment and consumer behavior.

2. Methods and Tools

- Support continued development of dietary data and dietary gap analysis;
- Develop food environment and consumer behavior indicators that can be applied; and
- Provide a Compendium of Available Methods and Tools and update/curate these (including applicable gender and equity methods and tools).

3. Aligned Food System Research in Focus Countries

- Develop cross-CRP/Center food system projects in partner countries. Initial list in which food system analysis has been conducted with national stakeholders: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Vietnam.

The Way Forward

To further the agenda of CGIAR research towards Transforming the Global Food System, the comments and input of the Science Leaders are essential. Including Science Leader comments and advice can then be used to update next steps and start implementation.